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ABSTRACT

When some new superintendents assume a new position, they get along with their boards and staff, learn the ropes, and eventually gain credibility and "own" their precarious perch on the wall. Others, like Humpty Dumpty, crash off the wall, never to regain control of the position. Certain factors account for success: experience; clear understanding of board expectations; board support; good interpersonal relationship skills; and completion of five passages in the taking-charge process. The five passages in this 2- or 3-year process are: taking hold, immersion, reshaping, consolidation, and refinement. The first passage, lasting 3 to 6 months, is a period of intense action and learning that sets the tone for the taking charge process. Successful superintendents orient themselves, evaluate the situation, and develop cognitive maps. During the immersion passage, superintendents run the organization in a more informed fashion and steep themselves in a less hectic learning process. During reshaping, superintendents reconfigure central office departments or school programs to implement the vision developed in the immersion passage. During the consolidation phase, focus is on implementing and evaluating changes made during reshaping and on resolving unanticipated problems. By the refinement stage, a period of little organizational change, superintendents are no longer considered new and should have established credibility and a power base. Humpty and the board must tread carefully and be vigilant to maintain the balance to assure long-term tenure. (MLH)

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PASSAGES NEW SUPERINTENDENTS EXPERIENCE IN TAKING CHARGE

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Humpty Dumpty sat on the wall
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall
All the King's horses
And all the King's men
Couldn't put Humpty together again.

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WHEN SOME SUPERINTENDENT'S TAKE OVER A NEW POSITION THINGS SEEM TO GO SWIMMINGLY. THEY GET ALONG WITH THEIR BOARDS AND STAFFS, LEARN THE ROPES, AND AFTER A CERTAIN LENGTH OF TIME, GAIN THEIR OWN CREDIBILITY AND "OWN" THEIR PRECARIOUS PERCH ON THE WALL. OTHER SUPERINTENDENTS DON'T DO SO WELL. THEY, LIKE HUMPTY DUMPTY, CRASH OFF THE WALL, NEVER TO GAIN CONTROL OF THE POSITION. NO AMOUNT OF BOARD UNDERSTANDING OR CONSULTANT ASSISTANCE PUTS HUMPTY BACK TOGETHER AGAIN. WE BELIEVE THAT CERTAIN FACTORS ACCOUNT FOR SUCCESS--EXPERIENCE, CLEAR UNDERSTANDING OF BOARD EXPECTATIONS, BOARD SUPPORT, GOOD INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIP SKILLS, AND COMPLETION OF FIVE PASSAGES IN THE TAKING-CHARGE PROCESS.

THE FIVE PASSAGES IN THIS TWO TO THREE YEAR PROCESS ARE: TAKING-HOLD, IMMERSION, RESHAPING, CONSOLIDATION AND REFINEMENT. WE PLAN TO DO TWO THINGS WITH YOU. WE WILL DEFINE EACH OF THE PASSAGES AS WE SEE THEM AND WE WILL PROVIDE YOU AN EXTENSIVE LIST OF EXAMPLES OF ACTIVITIES WE FEEL SHOULD OCCUR DURING EACH OF THE FIVE PASSAGES.

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PASSAGES

THE FIRST PASSAGE, TAKING-HOLD, TYPICALLY LASTS FROM THREE TO SIX MONTHS AND OFTEN SETS THE TONE, IF NOT THE DIRECTION, FOR THE REST OF THE TAKING-CHARGE PROCESS. TAKING-HOLD IS A PERIOD OF INTENSE ACTION AND LEARNING. IF YOUR NEW SUPERINTENDENCY IS A BIG PROMOTION OR CHANGE, YOU MAY AT TIMES FEEL OVERWHELMED. YOU MAY FEEL ON THE EDGE OF YOUR WALL ALL THE TIME. YOU MAY FEEL AS THOUGH YOU HAVE NO KNOWLEDGE BASE WHATSOEVER. YOU HAVE TO LEARN THE DISTRICT, THE BOARD, AND THE DISTRICT'S PROBLEMS. YOU ARE TRYING TO LEARN ABOUT THE DISTRICT, THE BOARD AND THE DISTRICT'S PROBLEMS AWFULLY FAST AND THAT WILL BE A TRICKY THING. FIRST, YOU MAY BE AFRAID TO DO ANYTHING FOR FEAR OF LOSING YOUR BALANCE ON THE WALL. THE PROBLEM IS YOU HAVE TO KEEP THE DISTRICT RUNNING WHILE YOU ARE LEARNING ABOUT IT.

DURING THIS PERIOD, NEW SUPERINTENDENTS TYPICALLY GRAPPLE WITH THE NATURE OF THE NEW SITUATION, TRYING TO UNDERSTAND THE TASKS AND PROBLEMS OF THE POSITION AND THE DISTRICT'S PROBLEMS. SUCCESSFUL SUPERINTENDENTS ORIENT THEMSELVES, EVALUATE THE SITUATION, AND DEVELOP COGNITIVE MAPS. UNSUCCESSFUL SUPERINTENDENT COLLEAGUES FALL OR ARE PUSHED OFF THE WALL WITHIN MONTHS. EARLY IN THIS STAGE IT MAY EVEN TAKE SEVERAL HOURS FOR YOU JUST TO GO THROUGH THE DAILY MAIL BECAUSE THE ISSUES ARE SO NEW. YOU MAY FEEL THAT THERE ARE NOT ENOUGH HOURS IN THE DAY.

EVALUATION AND ORIENTATION DURING THE TAKING-HOLD PASSAGE ARE IMPORTANT WHETHER YOU ARE PROMOTED FROM WITHIN OR ARE IMPORTED AS AN EXPERIENCED VETERAN. YOU SPEND TIME DURING THIS STAGE QUESTIONING AND EVALUATING YOUR EARLY ASSUMPTIONS AND PERCEPTIONS ABOUT KEY PEOPLE AND THE DISTRICT'S PROBLEMS. YOU MAY CONCLUDE THAT SENIOR MANAGEMENT MEMBERS (EVEN

ASSISTANT

SUPERINTENDENTS) ARE IN OVER THEIR HEADS. THE ACTIONS YOU TAKE DURING THE TAKING-HOLD PASSAGE TEND TO BE CORRECTIVE AS YOU FIX THE PROBLEMS YOU CAN. THE MAGNITUDE OF YOUR CORRECTIVE ACTIONS VARIES.

IMMERSION

COMPARED TO PASSAGE THROUGH THE TAKING-HOLD STAGE, YOUR IMMERSION PERIOD WILL BE QUIET IN TERMS OF CHANCES. A LULL PERIOD BETWEEN BURSTS OF ACTIVITY, IMMERSION IS A VERY SIGNIFICANT TIME DURING WHICH YOU ACQUIRE GREATER UNDERSTANDING OF YOUR SITUATION. DURING THE IMMERSION PASSAGE, YOU RUN YOUR ORGANIZATION IN A MORE INFORMED FASHION AND STEEP YOURSELF IN A LESS HECTIC, FINER GRAINED LEARNING PROCESS THAN IS POSSIBLE WHEN YOU ARE TAKING-HOLD. DURING THIS TIME YOU DEVELOP NEW CON- CEPTS OR AT LEAST GREATLY REVISE YOUR IDEAS OF WHAT YOU NEED TO DO.

MORE FOCUSED LEARNING HAPPENS DURING THIS PASSAGE BECAUSE YOU IMMERSE YOURSELF IN RUNNING THE DISTRICT AND LEARNING THE INTERACTIONS AND CONFLICTS YOU DEAL WITH DAY TO DAY. AS YOUR DISTRICT EXPERIENCE BASE GROWS, YOU WILL SEE PATTERNS YOU DID NOT SEE BEFORE. EVEN THOUGH CHANGES MADE DURING THE TAKING-HOLD STAGE WORK, THE IMMERSION PASSAGE STILL OFFERS YOU OPPORTUNITIES FOR FURTHER LEARNING. NEW PROBLEMS THAT HAD BEEN MASKED OR OVERSHADOWED BY OTHER PROBLEMS WILL EMERGE. DURING IMMERSION YOU WILL SOMETIMES QUESTION WHETHER YOU HAVE THE RIGHT PEOPLE IN PLACE. OBVIOUS QUESTIONS ABOUT COMPETENCIES AROSE DURING THE TAKING-HOLD PASSAGE, BUT NOW THEY ARE EASIER TO DISCERN. THE IMMERSION PASSAGE RESULTS IN YOUR HAVING A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF THE BASIC DYNAMICS OF THE DISTRICT, BOARD AND STAFF. IT RESULTS IN A SHARPER VISION AND PLAN OF ACTION FOR IMPROVING THE DISTRICT FURTHER. IT IS A TRANSITION PASSAGE, AND BY ITS END YOU, YOUR

BOARD AND YOUR KEY SUBORDINATES WILL BE IMPATIENT TO GET ON WITH THINGS.

RESHAPING

DURING THE THIRD PASSAGE, RESHAPING, THE SECOND IMPORTANT--AND IN MOST CASES THE LARGEST--BURST OF ACTIVITY WILL TAKE PLACE. THIS PASSAGE SHOULD BEGIN WITH THE PLANNING YOU DO FOR YOUR SECOND YEAR. LEARNING WILL CONTINUE BUT IN A MORE DIMINISHED AND ROUTINE FASHION. IN THE RESHAPING PERIOD YOU WILL DIRECT YOUR ATTENTION TOWARD RECONFIGURING ONE OR MORE DEPARTMENTS OF THE CENTRAL OFFICE OR PROGRAMS IN THE SCHOOLS TO IMPLEMENT THE VISION YOU DEVELOP DURING THE IMMERSION PASSAGE.

THE RESHAPING STAGE, LIKE THE TAKING-HOLD PERIOD, INVOLVES A GREAT DEAL OF ORGANIZATIONAL OR PROGRAM CHANGE. YOU ARE CAUTIONED THAT ALL PASSAGES ARE NOT DISCRETE. YOU MAY BE AT ONE STAGE IN ONE PASSAGE AND ANOTHER STAGE IN ANOTHER PASSAGE. NEVERTHELESS, MOST OF YOU WILL FIND YOURSELVES SPENDING ROUGHLY SIX MONTHS IN EACH PASSAGE, DEPENDING UPON YOUR EXACT EMPLOYMENT DATE AS DISTRICT OPERATIONS ARE CYCLICAL BY CALENDAR.

RESHAPING-STAGE CHANGES MAY INVOLVE INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAMS AS WELL AS MAJOR DISTRICT ORGANIZATIONAL SHIFTS. CHANGES WILL REQUIRE YOU TO CALL SEVERAL MEETINGS TO WORK OUT DETAILS WHERE POSITIONAL CHANGES AND RELOCATIONS ARE INVOLVED IF YOU ARE GOING TO GUARANTEE SUCCESS.

LEARNING DURING THE RESHAPING PASSAGE WILL CONSIST MAINLY OF FEEDBACK ON THE IMPACT OF CHANGES MADE. IT WILL END WHEN YOU HAVE IMPLEMENTED AS MANY OF YOUR CONCEPTS AS CIRCUMSTANCES ALLOW. SOMETIMES THE UNAVAILABILITY OF PEOPLE IN KEY POSITIONS WILL PREVENT YOU FROM COMPLETING THE JOB.

CONSOLIDATION

THE THIRD AND FINAL WAVE OF ACTION IN THE TAKING-CHARGE PROCESS OCCURS DURING THE FOURTH PASSAGE, CONSOLIDATION. THROUGHOUT THIS PERIOD, MUCH OF YOUR LEARNING AND MANY OF YOUR ACTIONS WILL FOCUS ON CONSOLIDATING AND FOLLOWING THROUGH ON CHANGES YOU MADE DURING RESHAPING. THE PROCESS IS EVALUATIVE. YOU AND YOUR KEY SUBORDINATES WILL JUDGE THE VALIDITY AND CONSEQUENCES OF YOUR RESHAPING ACTIONS AND TAKE CORRECTIVE ACTIONS. LEARNING AT THIS POINT WILL INVOLVE IDENTIFYING LEFT OVER FOLLOW-THROUGH IMPLEMENTATION PROBLEMS AND HOW YOU WILL DEAL WITH THEM. NEW SETS OF ISSUES WILL EVOLVE FROM UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS RESULTING FROM CHANGES YOU MADE DURING THE RESHAPING PASSAGE. MUCH OF THE CONSOLIDATION PERIOD'S EXTRAORDINARY ACTIVITY WILL INVOLVE DIAGNOSING AND STUDYING THESE PROBLEMS, THEN CORRECTING THEM. FINALLY, YOU WILL DEAL WITH THOSE ASPECTS OF YOUR VISION THAT YOU COULD NOT IMPLEMENT BEFORE. YOU MAY HAVE TO WAIT FOR AN IMPORTANT POSITION TO BE ESTABLISHED OR A RETIREMENT/RESIGNATION/REASSIGNMENT.

REFINEMENT

THE REFINEMENT PASSAGE IS A PERIOD OF LITTLE ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE. BY THIS POINT YOU WILL HAVE TAKEN CHARGE AND YOUR LEARNING AND ACTIONS WILL TEND TO FOCUS ON REFINING OPERATIONS OR PROGRAMS. THIS PASSAGE MARKS THE END OF THE TAKING-CHARGE PROCESS. BY THIS TIME, YOU WILL NO LONGER BE CONSIDERED NEW. YOU WILL NO LONGER FEEL NEW, NOR WILL THE BOARD OR YOUR SUBORDINATES PERCEIVE OR SPEAK OF YOU AS NEW. WHATEVER PROBLEMS YOU WILL FACE, THEY WILL NOT RESULT FROM YOUR NEWNESS. BY NOW, YOU WILL HAVE ESTABLISHED CREDIBILITY AND A POWER BASE OR NOT. YOU WILL HAVE HAD ENOUGH TIME TO SHAPE

YOUR SITUATION AND YOU WILL BE JUDGED BY THE RESULTS OF YOUR ACTIONS.

REFINEMENT IS A CALM PERIOD. FROM THIS STAGE ONWARD, YOUR LEARNING WILL BE MORE INCREMENTAL AND ROUTINE. IMPORTANT DEVELOPMENTS IN SCHOOL FUNDING, ENROLLMENT GROWTH, FACILITY ACQUISITION AVENUES, OR REFORM MOVEMENT MANDATES MAY DESTROY THIS CALMNESS, BUT WHATEVER ADDITIONAL LEARNING AND ACTION SUCH FACTORS LEAD TO, THEY WILL NOT RESULT FROM YOUR NEWNESS. FOR BETTER OR WORSE, YOU, THE NEW SUPERINTENDENT WILL HAVE TAKEN CHARGE. HUMPTY WILL ALWAYS SIT PRECARIOUSLY ON THE WALL. HUMPTY AND THE BOARD MUST TREAD CAREFULLY AND BE VIGILANT TO MAINTAIN THE BALANCE REQUIRED TO ASSURE LONG TERM TENURE.